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RHEFBIM/DIA IMADS WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDHP/DIA DHP-1 WASHINGTON DC
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0010
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SUBJECT: Can Radio Okapi survive after MONUC leaves the Congo?

REF: A) 09 KINSHASA 1097; B) KINSHASA 128; C) 09 KINSHASA 1044

¶1. (SBU) Summary: As the United Nations Mission to the Democratic
Republic of the Congo, or MONUC, begins internal discussions on its
ultimate withdrawal from the Congo, its radio station, Radio Okapi
-- which has helped to improve the country's media environment and
supported efforts for democratic development -- faces an uncertain
future. While UN management is developing plans to continue Okapi
broadcasting and newsgathering services at the highest possible
level when MONUC pulls out, the radio station will still need
significant international donor support to stay on the air.
Embassy Kinshasa would welcome a USG discussion of this issue and,
at a later stage, a dialogue between the USG and other donors. End
summary.

Radio of Peace

¶2. (SBU) Founded in 2002, Radio Okapi, whose motto is "the Radio
of Peace," now employs some 200 local journalists, overseen by 3 UN
staffers. It has the widest signal penetration, the largest
audience, and the highest level of journalistic professionalism of
any radio station in the DRC. Okapi's website
http://www.radiookapi.net offers live broadcasts, podcasts, and
news articles, which serve as a national wire service. A review of
all Kinshasa newspapers during the month of September 2009 by PAS
staff determined that 75 percent of reports on conflict in the
Eastern DRC originated from Okapi wire articles. Okapi's
programming includes call-in and talk shows encouraging lively
debate. The station played a significant role in supporting the
2006 elections with independent news coverage and voter
participation drives. Okapi also provides a wide range of public
service broadcasting, particularly in conflict zones, with its
"Gutahuka" and other demilitarization programs, support of Rewards
for Justice and promotion of other USG activities, and a host of
community-based efforts to bring peace to the DRC.

¶3. (SBU) On January 19, PAS Kinshasa met with outgoing MONUC
Public Information Chief Kevin Kennedy and Okapi Program Director
Jean-Jacques Simon, to discuss possible scenarios for the station's
future. (NOTE: Kennedy is leaving the DRC in late February to
serve as principal officer of the Africa II division (Great Lakes
Region) at the UN. End note.)

Okapi needs UN, international support

¶4. (SBU) Kennedy and Simon said Okapi's total operating budget is
difficult to document, since so much of its support comes from
services provided by MONUC. However, they estimate that Okapi has
a total annual budget of $14-16 million, $10-12 million of which
comes from the UN, while $4 million is provided by the Swiss NGO
"Fondation Hirondelle." Both pointed out that MONUC service
support includes management, personnel, administration,
communications, logistics, security, and transport. "MONUC is so
thoroughly integrated into the support structure of Okapi that it
will be very difficult for it to continue as MONUC draws down,"
Kennedy said. Most Okapi operations are situated on MONUC bases,
and Okapi personnel travel in MONUC aircraft and UN vehicles.
Broadcast stations, news bureaus and transmitters in the provinces
require logistic support, including fuel delivery and equipment
maintenance. When MONUC leaves, Okapi risks losing not only this
support, but also its material resources, as generally when a UN
peacekeeping force withdraws, it takes everything, including
broadcasting equipment, with it. (Note: It is expected that
Congolese President Kabila will call for MONUC to begin plans to
withdraw from the DRC during national independence festivities on
June 30, the 50th anniversary of the DRC's birth as a nation.
There are no specific plans at present, however, regarding MONUC's
departure. End note.)

¶5. (SBU) Kennedy and Simon noted that security for Okapi personnel
and physical assets is essential. Two Okapi journalists in Bukavu
have been murdered and others have received death threats (ref a).
Kennedy described the press freedom atmosphere in the DRC as
"absolutely toxic," and he expects that MONUC's diminished security
capacity will expose journalists to increased threats and
intimidation. "Long before journalists' lives are endangered,"
said Kennedy, "their reporting will be negatively affected by
political pressure." These pressures are particularly acute in the
Eastern DRC, but the security of journalists at Okapi's Kinshasa
headquarters would also be further compromised if MONUC leaves the
capital.

¶6. (SBU) Kennedy also pointed out that Okapi now broadcasts under
the aegis of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between MONUC
and the DRC. Any subsequent SOFA to extend beyond MONUC's
departure must include a provision for Okapi to broadcast, or else
the station will be subject to GDRC regulation, sanctioning and/or
censorship, and possibly excessive licensing fees. The GDRC has
already expressed to the UN its desire to renegotiate the SOFA,
which Kennedy suspects might be the first step toward government
regulation of Okapi.

"We've seen the zenith of Okapi"

¶7. (SBU) "We have seen the zenith of Radio Okapi," Kennedy said,
acknowledging that without MONUC, Okapi's level of service
provision will necessarily decline. Kennedy and Simon described
several possibilities for Okapi's post-MONUC future. Soliciting
additional donor funding through Hirondelle would require at least
$10 million annually to maintain current service levels, and still
be unable to provide security and logistical support, as well as
legal and political protection offered by the MONUC mandate.
Allowing Okapi to go private is not financially viable. Turning
Okapi over to the GDRC for integration into its RTNC broadcasting
network would destroy its independence and credibility. Shutting
Okapi down entirely would have potentially disastrous consequences.
Maintaining the highest level of political and material support

possible while developing a plan for sustainability is, according to Kennedy and Simon, the only viable option.

¶8. (SBU) As they see the power of Okapi residing in brand credibility and the reach of its network, Kennedy and Simon believe that the best way to maintain optimal service is to enhance Okapi's internet capacity. The Okapi website is being made more interactive and will offer enhanced information services. Kennedy and Simon envision an internet server, either the existing server in Lausanne financed by Hirondelle, or another also outside of the DRC, as the future headquarters of Okapi. According to Kennedy and Simon, while not ideal, a virtual Okapi would be much easier to maintain logistically, and require fewer resources. The headquarters staff would continue to receive reports from journalists in the field, through internet, telephone calls and SMS messaging. The quality and even quantity of reports would certainly suffer, as would the station's audience reach. But at least it would remain on the air, Kennedy and Simon pointed out. Furthermore, to ensure that Okapi services under this model were actually effective, Kennedy asserted the donor community would need to obtain political assurances from the GDRC that Okapi structures would be preserved. (Note: Tensions, however, between UN management and local Okapi staff -- ref b-- make these already difficult changes even more challenging).

"A great loss"

¶9. (SBU) How important is Radio Okapi to the promotion of democracy in the DRC? On February 3, senior press assistant spoke to several local journalists on the subject. Dovin Ntelolo of L'Observateur said that if Okapi were to go off the air, the Congolese, particularly in the provinces, would no longer have access to credible information. A journalist with Agence Congolaise de Presse, the national wire service, said that only Okapi is capable of conducting voter participation drives and other public service campaigns. Mamie Tambu of Antenne A said Okapi has been the only source of reliable information in the DRC since the shutdown of Radio France International (ref c). Eyenga Sana of Le Potentiel said that it would be "a great loss" if Okapi were silenced, given its political neutrality and support of democratic debate. Edouard Mputu of The Post said that Okapi's call-in program "Parole Aux Auditeurs" (Listeners' Turn to Speak) and debate show "Dialogue Entre Congolais" (Dialogue between Congolese) offer the only platforms for free and open discussion of serious issues currently available.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: Radio Okapi plays a highly positive role in support of democratic institutions by promoting freedom of speech, responsible journalism, peace, tolerance and national unity. Its departure from the local media scene would diminish the public's access to credible and non-partisan information and have negative effects on other news media that depend on Okapi for content. Plans for MONUC mandate renewal beyond May 2011 should provide for Radio Okapi's continued broadcasting, and Okapi's future should be a consideration in discussions concerning an eventual MONUC drawdown or withdrawal. Post would welcome discussions among policymakers in Washington and, at a subsequent stage, between the USG and representatives of other interested countries, including Canada, EU members, Switzerland and Japan, to identify alternative sources of funding for Radio Okapi, whose continued presence in the DRC can only serve to strengthen Congolese democracy. End comment. GARVELINK